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Emotional Rescue

The Demands of Queer History

> Take history at night; have you ever thought of that, now? Was it at night that Sodom became Gomorrah? It was at night, I swear! A city given over to the shades, and that's why it has never been countenanced or understood to this day.
>
> —Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Recently, long-standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study. The turn from a focus on "effective history" to a focus on "affective history" has meant that critics have stopped asking, "Were there gay people in the past?" but rather have focused on questions such as: "Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?" or even, perhaps, "What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?" Critics such as Christopher Nealon, Carolyn Dinshaw, Ann Cvetkovich, David Halperin, Carla Freccero, Scott Bravmann, Elizabeth Freeman, L. O. A. Fradenburg, and Valerie Traub have shifted the focus away from epistemological questions in the approach to the queer past; rather, they make central "the desires that propel such engagements, the affects that drive relationality even across time."[1] Exploring the vagaries of cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead, this work has made explicit the affective stakes of debates on method and knowledge. Mixing psychoanalytic approaches with more wide-ranging treatments of affect, they have traced the identifications, the desires, the longings, and the love that structure the encounter with the queer past.[2]

My approach to queer history is profoundly indebted to this new field of inquiry. I focus on the negative affects—the need, the aversion, and

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the longing—that characterize the relation between past and present. This decision to look on the dark side comes out of my sense that contemporary critics tend to describe the encounter with the past in idealizing terms. In particular, the models that these critics have used to describe queer cross-historical relations—friendship, love, desire, and community—seem strangely free of the wounds, the switchbacks, and the false starts that give these structures their specific appeal, their binding power. Friendship and love have served as the most significant models for thinking about how contemporary critics reach out to the ones they study. I would like to suggest that more capacious and deidealized accounts of love and friendship would serve to account for the ambivalence and violence of the relation to the past—to what is most queer in that relation.

Today, many critics attest that since Stonewall the worst difficulties of queer life are behind us. Yet the discomfort that contemporary queer subjects continue to feel in response to the most harrowing representations from the past attests to their continuing relevance. The experience of queer historical subjects is not at a safe distance from contemporary experience; rather, their social marginality and abjection mirror our own. The relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair, and loss but also by the shame of identification. In attempting to construct a positive genealogy of gay identity, queer critics and historians have often found themselves at a loss about what to do with the sad old queens and long-suffering dykes who haunt the historical record. They have disavowed the difficulties of the queer past, arguing that our true history has not been written. If critics do admit the difficulties of the queer past, it is most often in order to redeem them. By including queer figures from the past in a positive genealogy of gay identity, we make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact. I understand this impulse not only as a widespread but as a structural feature of the field, a way of counteracting the shame of having a dark past.[3]

Someone Will Remember Us

In *A Lover's Discourse,* Roland Barthes writes that "the discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are the raised arms of Desire, and there are the wide-open arms of Need. I oscillate, I vacillate between

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the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms."[4] Barthes construes the relation between desire and need as consecutive: the lover vacillates between two different responses to absence. It is striking to note, however, how often these images converge. Desire in its most infantile, its most reduced state is difficult to distinguish from need; need in its most tyrannical form nearly approaches the phallic image of desire. Barthes offers an image of such convergence in the photograph of himself as a boy in his mother's arms reproduced at the beginning of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The caption reads, "The demand for love."[5] For Barthes, the notion of "demand" captures the close link between need and desire.[6] In this photograph, the young Barthes offers an image of the demanding child, that slumped, pathetic figure who nonetheless manages to press his needs home with real force.[7]

If this photograph reveals the adult force of childish need, we can call to mind many examples that reveal the babyish element in adult desire. Think, for instance, of the sneering, sulking pout of that consummate erotic bully, Mick Jagger. In almost any song by the Rolling Stones, the call to "just come upstairs" gets its heat not only from the authority of the desiring father but also from the hunger of the prodigal son. In "Emotional Rescue," for instance, macho posturing shades into schoolboy whining as Jagger intersperses deep-voiced promises to be your "knight in shining armor," to "come to your emotional rescue," with half-mumbled assertions that last night he was "crying like a child, like a child." In the chorus, Jagger gives us the cry itself: "You will be mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, all mine / You could be mine, could be mine, / Be mine, all mine." In the infantile repetition of the possessive, one hears the pathetic cry of the child who is not in a position to own anything.[8]

You will be mine; you could be mine—but you probably won't be mine. This combination of demand and desperation characterizes the relation to the gay past. But queer critics tend to disavow their need for the past by focusing on the heroic aspect of their work of historical recovery. Like many demanding lovers, queer critics promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves.

In imagining historical rescue as a one-way street, we fail to acknowledge the dependence of the present on the past. Contemporary critics tend to frame the past as the unique site of need, as if the practice of history

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were not motivated by a sense of lack in the present. We might conceive of the work of historical affirmation not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in the bad gay past, but rather as a means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present.[9] At the same time, such acts of resolve allow us to ignore the resistance of queer historical figures to our advances toward them.

In order to better describe how this fantasy works, I consider an exchange between the Greek poet Sappho and one of her most rapt modern readers. Anne Carson offers the following version of one of Sappho's lyrics: "Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time."[10] Sappho's poem offers to its audience what sounds like foreknowledge: "Someone will remember us." The prediction seems to have the simple status of truth, but the "I say" at the center of this lyric attests to the longing and uncertainty that is the poem's motive and its subject. In making the prediction more emphatic, "I say" tips the hand of the speaker, shows this prophecy to be a matter of wishful thinking. The speaker protects her audience from the unpredictability of the future by means of a personal guarantee; the "I" of the poem offers its auditors a shelter from oblivion. (One of the uncanny aspects of the poem is its ability to offer this consolation—in person, as it were—not only to its immediate audience but also to its future readers.)

The sheer density of longing in this short poem is striking. Crack the shell of its confident assertion of immortality and questions emerge: "Can one be remembered in one's absence?" "When I leave the room, will you still think about me?" "Will we be remembered after death?" The poem answers "yes": "Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time." The speaker promises her audience that they will be thought of not only tomorrow, or the day after, but "in another time," and by strangers. Sappho's lyric promises memory across death: once we and everyone we know and everyone who knows us is dead, someone is still going to think about us. We will be in history.

This fragment offers a nearly irresistible version of what queer subjects want to hear from their imagined ancestors. It is what Christopher Nealon refers to in *Foundlings* as the "message in the bottle" dispatched from the queer past—sent seeking a "particular historical kind of afterlife," "some historical 'other' place" where "the unspeakability" of same-sex love "can gain audition" (182). For the early twentieth-century lesbian poet Renée Vivien, Sappho's poetry was just such a message in a bottle. In order to read it, she learned Greek and began obsessively translating

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and expanding Sappho's fragments and even traveled to the island of Lesbos with her lover Natalie Clifford Barney to recreate the legendary school for girls. In her 1903 volume *Sapho,* Vivien offers translations and expansions of Sappho's fragmentary lyrics that take up themes of tormented desire, isolation, and lost love in the originals and amplify the historical resonances in them.

Vivien's attention to the vulnerability of cross-historical contacts is legible in her version of "Someone will remember us."

> Quelqu'un, je crois, se souviendra dans
> l'avenir de nous.
>
> Dans les lendemains que le sort file et tresse,
> Les êtres futurs ne nous oublieront pas . . .
> Nous ne craignons point, Atthis, ô ma Maîtresse!
> L'ombre du trépas.
>
> Car ceux qui naîtront après nous dans ce monde
> Où râlent les chants jetteront leur soupir
> Vers moi, qui t'aimais d'une angoisse profonde,
> Vers toi, mon Désir.
>
> Les jours ondoyants que la clarté nuance,
> Les nuits de parfums viendront éterniser
> Nos frémissements, notre ardente souffrance
> Et notre baiser.
>
> [Someone, I believe, will remember us
> in the future.
>
> In the tomorrows that fate spins and weaves,
> Those who come after us will not forget us . . .
> We have no fear, O, Atthis my Mistress!
> Of the shadow of death.
>
> Because those who are born after us in this world
> Filled with death-cries will cast their sighs
> Toward me, who loved you with deep anguish,
> Toward you, my Desire.
>
> The wavering days that the clear light limns
> And the perfumed night will render eternal
> Our tremblings, our ardent suffering,
> And our kiss.][11]

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Although "making the moment last" is a commonplace of the Western lyric tradition, this trope takes on tremendous weight in Vivien's rewritings of Sappho's lyrics. The promise of immortality that is associated with the aesthetic is put to work here as a bulwark against historical isolation and social exclusion. How can connections across time be forged out of fear and erotic torments? Vivien compares the transformation of fleeting moments into tradition to the way that "les jours ondoyants" make up an eternity even though they are made of nothing more substantial than light and shade. In this comparison, a love that is fleeting and filled with anguish becomes eternal simply by aging—by being continually exposed to the light of day and the perfumed shades of night.[12] Vivien also invokes a specifically erotic mystery: how the experience of shared erotic suffering, obsession, and anxiety can add up to eternal devotion.

Of course, it is not assured that such torments do lead to eternal devotion (just as it is not assured that the messages cast out in bottles ever get read). The fantasy of permanence is, however, the central conceit of the poem and it represents the deepest wish of Sappho's lonely historical correspondent. Vivien makes true love the model for cross-historical fidelity, and, speaking in Sappho's voice, promises recognition. Taking up the role of adoring lover, Vivien answers Sappho's call, leaving no doubt that someone in another time would in fact think of her. Through such a response, Vivien seems to rescue Sappho—to repair the torn fragments of her text, and to stitch up the gap in the temporal fabric that her lyric address opens. But it is clear that by translating Sappho Vivien was working against the profound sense of alienation and historical isolation that she felt at the turn of the twentieth century. By coming to Sappho's rescue, Vivien manages to rescue herself. She enters history by becoming Sappho's imagined and desired "someone."[13]

Although many cast queer historical subjects in the role of Sappho—as lonely, isolated subjects in search of communion with future readers—I want to suggest that it makes sense to see ourselves in the role of Vivien. That is to say, contemporary queer subjects are also isolated, lonely subjects looking for other lonely people, just like them. Vivien finds in Sappho an almost perfect interlocutor; the echo chamber in which she replayed Sappho's fragments afforded profound satisfactions. But few encounters with the queer past run so smoothly. These texts rarely express

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such a perfect longing for rescue and are often characterized by a resistance to future readers and to the very idea of community. We do encounter some texts that say, "Someone will remember us / I say / even in another time." But some of these lost figures do not want to be found. What then?

Noli Me Tangere

Carolyn Dinshaw's book, *Getting Medieval*, investigates the affective dynamics of queer history. Dinshaw focuses on the metaphorics of touch in the relation of contemporary critics to the medieval past; she explores the "strange fellowships" and the "partial connections" that link queer subjects across time. Through such connections, queer subjects build an imagined community of the marginal and the excluded. By trying to create relations across time, Dinshaw follows what she calls "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now. Such an impulse extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past" (1). Rather than seeing herself as the heroic savior of the past, Dinshaw puts herself into relation with it, describing her own desires for "partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time" (21).

The longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by the historical isolation of individual queers as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive. Like Dinshaw, Christopher Nealon surveys these desires for connection across time in *Foundlings* through his accounts of the "affect-genealogies" and "hopeful analogies" to other historical forms of community in twentieth-century queer (or "foundling") texts. It makes sense to consider these works in affective historiography within the context of larger efforts in queer studies to describe or invent new models of queer community and coalitional politics: nonbiological inheritance, new forms of kinship, "the friendship ethic," queer families, stigma- or shame-based alliances, and so on.[14] This work on new forms of queer community has been generative. At the same time, others working in queer studies have been critical of the concept of community. In *Against the Romance of Community*,

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Miranda Joseph wonders about the "relentless return" of a "celebratory discourse of community" in queer and feminist criticism despite long-standing critiques of the exclusionary force of the term.[15] In *Queer Fictions of the Past,* Scott Bravmann points to the way that current debates over historical meaning "indicate a lack of consensus on who or what gay and lesbian people are and even highlight the anti-community aspects of the differences between and among queer historical subjects."[16]

Dinshaw is certainly alive to the force of these critiques, and she notes that she uses the term community in a way that does not "imply unity or homogeneity" (22).[17] Dinshaw is at pains to emphasize the way that desires for queer community are in a state of tension with queer isolation and resistance to community.[18] In several passages, she explores the paradox of shared isolation and she argues that the connections she describes are partial and incomplete. Dinshaw specifically contrasts this fellowship of the "isolated, the abject, [and] the shamed" with a more idealized version of community. In a forum about *Getting Medieval,* she writes, "I want to stress that the community across time formed of such vibrations, such touches, is not necessarily a feel-good collectivity of happy homos."[19]

Despite Dinshaw's critical take on community and her interest in exploring shared isolation, the emphasis in *Getting Medieval* sometimes falls on community at the expense of isolation. A crucial example in the book is the work of Roland Barthes, an exemplary figure owing to his dual interest in isolation and community. Yet there are forms of resistance to community in Barthes's work that seem particularly difficult to accept, at least in part because they threaten to remove him from the affective circuit of Dinshaw's study. Dinshaw cites Barthes from *Writer Sollers:* " 'We allow people to be different (that is our master stroke), but not unusual. We accept types, but not individuals . . . But what about the person who is absolutely alone? Who isn't a Breton, a Corsican, a woman, a homosexual, a madman, an Arab, etc.? Somebody who doesn't even belong to a minority? Literature is his voice' " (cited in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval,* 45). Reading this passage, Dinshaw remarks that the "prospect of community is very unclear," but goes on to argue that "despite the emphasis on the 'absolutely alone,' relations between lives, between entirely contingent and profoundly singular lives, were indeed a concern throughout the long and otherwise uneven span of Barthes's

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texts" (45). Not only does this passage from Barthes present the ongoing question of whether or in what way it makes sense to consider him a "gay author," it also raises the specter of the person who is "absolutely alone."[20] If literature is "his voice," does it then follow that by reading those works we undo the absoluteness of that solitude? And is counter-acting solitude or singularity something that we, as contemporary readers, should even aim to do?

Dinshaw is interested in the presence of the body in Barthes's ruminations on reading and collectivity; she is particularly interested in his work on Michelet as an example of an embodied, loving historical practice. She cites Barthes on Michelet: "For Michelet the historical mass is not a puzzle to reconstitute, it is a body to embrace. The historian exists only to recognize a warmth."[21] Barthes lovingly describes such relations throughout his work, and his identification with Michelet is undoubtedly grounded in his tendency to form similar attachments. But he also considers Michelet's physical repulsions at length. In another passage cited by Dinshaw, Barthes writes that "fits of nausea, dizziness, oppression do not come only from the seasons, from the weather; it is the very horror of narrated history which provokes them: Michelet has 'historical' migraines." (cited in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval,* 47). Barthes's relation to Michelet is forwarded here as a model of the "tenderness" that is possible between contemporary queer critics and the subjects they study. Dinshaw writes that Barthes "created his own queer relation to Michelet by 'living with' him" (48). Do we need to be reminded that such an arrangement tends to be a source of pain as well as pleasure? That the darkened bedroom is a site not only of caresses but also of migraines?

Dinshaw focuses on the queer impulse to "touch the past" through a meditation on Christ's words to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection: *Noli me tangere* (Don't touch me). Dinshaw's chapter on Margery Kempe's "too heavy, queer touch" begins with an epigraph from Leslie Feinberg's work *Stone Butch Blues:* "Touch is something I could never take for granted" (cited in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval,* 143). By attending to the history of queer abjection, Dinshaw constructs a genealogy of untouched and untouchable figures, subjects constituted through refusal. These subjects are portrayed, however, as yielding to, even warming to the touch of the queer historian. It is striking that in her extended meditation on the phrase *Noli me tangere,* Dinshaw does not consider the potential

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resistance of such figures to the touch of contemporary queer historians. At stake in this omission may be not only the desire of the queer historian for a response from the past but also a tendency to read the queerness of queer desire as excess rather than lack. Queer desire is often figured as "loving too much," as in Dinshaw's reading of Margery Kempe's excessive, dissonant desire. But it would also make sense to understand queerness as an absence of or aversion to sex.[22]

Untouchability runs deep in queer experience. Here is Willa Cather on the subject, thinking about the "sweetness and anguish" that characterize family life in Katherine Mansfield's stories: "One realizes that human relations are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them."[23] Or Cherríe Moraga: "My recurring sense of myself outside the normal life and touch of human beings was again, in part, a kind of revelation."[24] *Noli me tangere* is, in this sense, an apt motto for queer historical experience, but its effects are unpredictable. Although it serves as protection against the blows of normal life, the family, and homophobic violence, it also works against other forms of community and affiliation, including, of course, queer community.

Contemporary critics approach these figures from the past with a sense of the inevitability of their progress toward us—of their place in the history of modern homosexuality. Their relation to this future remains utterly tenuous, however. If their trajectory to a queer future seems inevitable, this appearance is perhaps best explained by the fact that *we are that future.* Our existence in the present depends on being able to imagine these figures reaching out to us. One is reminded constantly of the fragility of these connections in Dinshaw's text. Still, it remains difficult to hear these subjects when they say to us, "Don't touch me."

Against Identification

In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England,* Valerie Traub takes a step backward from the intimacies that Dinshaw explores. More circumspect in its attachments than *Getting Medieval,* Traub's book offers a reflection on the ascendancy of the identificatory impulse in lesbian and gay historiography. Explicitly comparing her own project to

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Dinshaw's, Traub offers her own analysis: "Whereas Dinshaw's impulse is to foster queer community by 'touching' the medieval past, to make 'new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures' . . . my impulse is to analyze the desires that propel such identifications."[25] Rather than making alliances with the dead through taking up and extending such impulses, Traub offers a genealogy of identification, considering why it is that "looking at ourselves in the mirror" has become the dominant methodology in gay and especially in lesbian studies.

Dinshaw figures pleasure as a resource for queer studies; in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism,* pleasure—insofar as it is bound up with identification—is a problem. Though Traub suggests that it would be impossible to completely rid historical or political practice of the impulse to identification, she links the pleasures of identification to cognitive failure. In the final passages of her book, Traub effects a turn away from identification and toward desire, suggesting that we might approach the figures from the past "not as subject *to* our identifications, but as objects *of* our desire" (354). In this way, Traub hopes to borrow some of the pleasure of psychic and historical identification and reinvest it in desire, which she understands as an authentic encounter with another who is different from and external to the self.

Eroticizing historical alterity is only part of the story, though. Traub's more pressing concern is with the melancholic nature of lesbian studies. She argues that the "discovery" of early modern lesbianism is a way of "compensating for the fact that, despite the categories we inhabit, our knowledge of ourselves as individuals as well as within group identities is vexed, uncertain, in continual and oft-times painful negotiation. Quite simply, we do not know who and what 'we' are, or how we might go about defining ourselves beyond the reaction formations conceived under the influence of heterosexism and homophobia" (352). According to Traub, lesbian critics have not come to terms with the pain of historical isolation and instead reenact that trauma through repeated searches for other lesbians "just like them" in the past: "The effort to identify early modern *lesbians* is not so much a case of individual misrecognition as a collective melancholic response to the trauma of historical elision. Despite the common invocation of how homosexuals have been 'hidden from history,' there has been little investigation into the effects on the collective *lesbian* psyche of the systematic denial of historicity" (350).[26]

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Traub's attention to the pain that is at the heart of lesbian and gay historiography is welcome, as is her call for an investigation of the psychic costs of repeated encounters with the "empty archive." One may certainly see both pain and the disavowal of pain in Renée Vivien's textual approaches to Sappho. Traub's solution to this problem is to move lesbian historiography beyond the impasse of melancholic disavowal by mourning those losses and by giving up on the dream of identification. She draws a distinction between personal and collective responses to loss, suggesting that "the desire to view oneself in the mirror, however enabling personally, need not be the procedural ground of lesbian history" (334). Traub continues: "Rather than mourning our disconnection from women of the past and allowing them to exist autonomously through their textual traces, we have disavowed our mourning and encrypted the pain of that disavowal within our own critical procedures . . . Such a response is understandable and, at the level of the individual psyche, potentially productive. On a cultural and methodological level, however, it ensures a continued melancholic identification with, and dependence upon, the terms of erotic similitude, in a paralyzing enactment of queer trauma" (350).

Drawing on Wendy Brown's concept of "wounded attachments" as the basis of identity politics as well as works on mourning and melancholy by Judith Butler and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Traub suggests that contemporary critics work through psychic impasses in order to get over paralyzing and debilitating engagements with the historical past. What is troubling about such a suggestion is the fact that some aspects of lesbian history only live on in the present through such wounded attachments and that severing them will mean putting important—albeit traumatic—parts of the past to rest. Queer history is, in a sense, nothing but wounded attachments: a "debilitating engagement with the past" (351) might just be another name for the practice of history. Confronted with the unresolved grief of lesbian historical feeling, Traub suggests cutting the knot in an act of methodological triage. While there are aspects of the past we may be unable to see because of unresolved grief, the key to making historical losses present is not necessarily to mourn them: mourning can be another name for forgetting.

Henry Abelove gestures toward another relation to the queer past in his recent book *Deep Gossip* with a citation from Allen Ginsberg's

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elegy for Frank O'Hara, "City Midnight Junk Strains." Ginsberg describes O'Hara as a "curator of funny emotions." Abelove argues that Ginsberg refers not only to O'Hara's job at the Museum of Modern Art but also to his exemplary relation to an imagined queer community. For Abelove, curating contrasts sharply with curing: "Curating, taking care of, isn't curing—or wanting to cure—or supposing or imagining that a cure is needed."[27] We might take this distinction to suggest that the work of the historian is a kind of "interminable analysis." Taking care of the past without attempting to fix it means living with bad attachments, identifying through loss, allowing ourselves to be haunted.

Carla Freccero suggests something very similar in *Queer/Early/Modern* when she proposes "an approach to history—and to justice—that would neither 'forget the dead' nor 'successfully' mourn them" (78). Freccero's final chapter, "Queer Spectrality," focuses on the murder of Brandon Teena and its subsequent replaying in popular media, film, and academic criticism. Freccero's insistence on Brandon's afterlife in the present offers an example of a queer ethics of historical practice, a willingness to live with ghosts and to remember the most painful, the most impossible stories. Still, it is not clear what would constitute proper care for ghosts like these (with their funny emotions). Turning back toward them seems essential, but it also demands something that is, in the end, more difficult: allowing them to turn their backs on us.

Against Consolation

The historiographic method of Michel Foucault is regularly invoked in contemporary queer contexts as exemplary in its resistance to the temptations of identification and mirroring. In his work on genealogy, Foucault argues for the need to develop a historical method that does not rely on the past to secure the stability of the present. In his much-cited essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," he writes:

> "Effective" history differs from the history of historians in being without constants. Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tenden-

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> cies which encourage the consoling play of recognitions. Knowledge [*savoir*], even under the banner of history, does not depend on "rediscovery," and it emphatically excludes the "rediscovery of ourselves." History becomes "effective" to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself.[28]

Rather than moving forward from a determinate origin and proceeding according to a smooth logic of progression, history through the lens of genealogy begins accidentally and proceeds by fits and starts. Such a history, while useless for the "consoling play of recognitions" that is the favored mode of history by historians, serves to disrupt the seeming inevitability of the present. Divisive and incendiary, genealogy points out the otherness of the past, and shows us our own image in the present as multiple, subject to an internal alienation.

Elsewhere in this essay, Foucault writes that "the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all those discontinuities that cross us" (386–387). In his descriptions of the unpredictable and accidental nature of events, Foucault argues against the idea that history's movement is continuous or marked by progress. As a result, he suggests that we can find no solid epistemological basis in the present for identifications in the past. Resemblances across time are not dependable since over time the very terms of inquiry shift.

Queer critics have generally understood the concept of identity to be both politically and philosophically bankrupt. Although such critiques of identity have made for important changes in gay and lesbian politics and theory, it seems that the queer stance against identity has short-circuited important critical work on the history of identity. Identity is, as many of these critics have attested, a deeply problematic and contradictory concept; nonetheless, it remains a powerful organizing concept in contemporary experience. We need an account of identity that allows us to think through its contradictions and to trace its effects. Such a history can offer a critique of identity without dispensing with it as a category of historical experience.

The commitment to the "dissipation of identity" among queer critics has often blinded them to the tenacity of this concept both in history

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and in individual subjectivity. Identity accounts not only for the shape of the past but also for the feelings that we continue to have about that past. It is in large part because we recognize figures, emotions, and images from the past as like ourselves that we feel their effects so powerfully. Rather than attempt to "overcome" identity, I want to suggest a mode of historiography that recognizes the inevitability of a "play of recognitions," but that also sees these recognitions not as consoling but as shattering. What has been most problematic about gay and lesbian historiography to date is not, I want to argue, its attachment to identity but rather its consistently affirmative bias. Critics imagine that no one would search out the roots of his or her identity if that history were not positive. But we are condemned to the search for roots and for resemblances; we cannot help searching the past for images of ourselves. In their introduction to *Premodern Sexualities,* Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero suggest the inevitability of historical identification: "History is riddled by the paradoxes of identification: by the impossible pleasures and obligations of imitating the past" (xvi).

Fradenburg and Freccero go on to argue that the pleasure of forging historical identifications is not a bad thing: "one of the central challenges queer perspectives offer to historicist practice is their insistence that the purpose of recognizing pleasure's role in the production of historical discourse is not necessarily to launch yet another renunciation of such pleasure" (xvii–xviii). Still, such identifications are not pleasurable in any simple or straightforward way. Fradenburg and Freccero suggest that a closer look at the processes of historical identification might actually serve to undermine rather than to stabilize identity. Considering the importance of writing "long histories," they wonder "how would we write the history of the ways in which the past is *in* us, our identities being perhaps as temporally unstable as they are in other ways?" (xix). Fradenburg and Freccero illuminate the way that identifications across time do not serve merely to consolidate identities in the present; instead, such identifications can illuminate the uncanny life of the past inside our present. I would add that negative or ambivalent identifications with the past can serve to disrupt the present. Making connections with historical losses or with images of ruined or spoiled identity in the past can set into motion a gutting "play of recognitions," another form of effective history.

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At Night

In *Getting Medieval,* Dinshaw argues that "pleasure may be afforded by a break with the past, a rupture of historical identity . . . ; the loss of the past might carry an erotic charge" (36). Foucault's work on the archive and his reflections on historiographical method offer an example of the manifold pleasures afforded by "the loss of the past." The following passage from "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" begins coolly enough with methodological injunctions and slowly builds toward a fantasy of historical encounter:

> A genealogy of values, morality, asceticism, and knowledge will never confuse itself with a quest for their "origins," will never neglect as inaccessible all the episodes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence, once unmasked, as the face of the other. (373)

The genealogist appears here as an inexhaustible lover, attentive to every detail, waiting for the other's appearance as for the break of day. Foucault's approach to history is indelibly though often invisibly marked by desire, and, I would suggest, by specifically queer experiences, rhetorics, and longings. Foucault's own account of his famously ascetic historical practice appears to be anything but devoid of desire. Rather, it is grounded in an anxious, restless desire—a desire for a recognition that could hardly be called consoling.

In an essay that Dinshaw reads at length, "The Lives of Infamous Men," Foucault describes his own experience in the prison archives of the *Hôpital general* and of the Bastille. Foucault attends to the difficulties of studying the lives of obscure men whose only trace is a criminal record and who reach contemporary readers through improbable and unnecessary paths:

> Having been nothing in history, having played no appreciable role in events or among important people, having left no identifiable trace around them, they don't have and never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of these words . . . This purely verbal existence, which makes these forlorn or villainous individuals into quasi-fictional beings, is due to their nearly complete disappearance, and to that luck or mischance which resulted in the survival, through

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> the peradventure of rediscovered documents, of a scarce few words that speak of them or that are pronounced by them. A dark but, above all, a dry legend . . . By nature, it is bereft of any tradition; discontinuities, effacement, oblivion, convergences, reappearances: this is the only way it can reach us. Chance carries it from the beginning . . . So that between these people of no importance and us who have no more importance than they, there is no necessary connection. Nothing made it likely for them to emerge from the shadows, they instead of others, with their lives and their sorrows.[29]

Foucault's wan description of the belated emergence from the archive of these obscure figures is at some distance from heroic plots of historical discovery. Underlining the chance nature of the encounter between historians and the subjects they study, Foucault attempts to drain away the affect that surrounds the historical encounter: the legend of Foucault's "infamous men" is dark but, "above all, dry."

Foucault's de-cathexis of the historical encounter is also linked to a critique of the specular logic of historical discovery. Between these figures and "us" there is "no necessary connection": there is no reason that their traces should have reached us and furthermore no reason why they should resemble us. Yet it is at the moment that Foucault emphasizes the purely contingent and unmotivated relation between these infamous men and contemporary readers that he draws an explicit comparison between us and them: "so that between these people of no importance and us who have no more importance than they, there is no necessary connection." Although there may not be a necessary connection here, there is in fact a sufficient connection: what we share with these figures is a lack of importance. We might say that this lack of importance is the only important thing about us.

In a moment that is crucial to Dinshaw's theory of queer touches across time, Foucault describes being "physically affected" in the archive: he feels a vibration "still today" from these texts. He avows his affective investment in these stories, describing the book to follow as "a mood-based and purely subjective book," a "little obsession that found its system." The community of "abject others" that Dinshaw locates in Foucault's essay is grounded in a logic of the improbable, the contingent, and the insignificant. The world of the shadows that Foucault traces in this passage looks, on the one hand, like the dustheap from which all historical figures must be rescued; on the other hand, it looks like a kind of

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demimonde or queer underworld where men of no importance can meet for chance encounters.[30]

Foucault's attachment to these figures resonates perhaps most strongly in his descriptions of their encounters with power. Foucault suggests that these subjects reach us only because of the violence that touched them:

> What snatched them from the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained was the encounter with power; without that collision, it's very unlikely that any word would be there to recall their fleeting trajectory. The power that watched these lives, that pursued them, that lent its attention, if only for a moment, to their complaints and their little racket, and marked them with its claw was what gave rise to the few words about them that remain for us. ("The Lives of Infamous Men," 161)

Defending his methodology, and answering an imaginary critic who would argue that he imagines historical subjects not in themselves ("from below") but only in relation to power, Foucault responds with a question: "would anything at all remain of what [these figures] were in their violence or in their singular misfortune had they not, at a given moment, met up with power and provoked its forces?" (161). The catch in his voice is audible as he describes the obscurity and violence that marked these lives—had they not met up with power, would anything at all remain? A bit later in the essay, Foucault amplifies this point, arguing that these figures are *constituted* by the violence that they experienced. They are "infamous in the strict sense: they no longer exist except through the terrible words that were destined to render them forever unworthy of the memory of men . . . Useless to look for another face for them, or to suspect a different greatness in them; they are no longer anything but that which was meant to crush them—no more nor less" (164). Hunted down by power, here figured as a lion rampant (or is it a clumsy bear?), these figures are legible only in their misery: it is in the cut, as it were, that we can locate Foucault's attachment. In this sense, we might say that his investment is not so much in these infamous men themselves but rather "in the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained."

In drawing attention to this moment in the essay, I want to suggest that the sensation—the cross-historical touch—that Foucault feels in

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the archive may be as much a mauling as a caress. He quickens not only to the caress of a queer or marginal figure in the past but also to the more brutal touch of the law. What happens in the archive is an encounter with historical violence, which includes both physical injury and the violence of obscurity, or annihilation from memory. Is it possible that Foucault wants his historical encounter that way?

Consider a related moment in a 1967 interview when, discussing his methodology, Foucault narrates a bad dream:

> A nightmare has haunted me since my childhood: I am looking at a text that I can't read, or only a tiny part of it is decipherable. I pretend to read it, aware that I'm inventing; then suddenly the text is completely scrambled, I can no longer read anything or even invent it, my throat tightens up and I wake up.
>
> I'm not blind to the personal investment there may be in this obsession with language that exists everywhere and escapes us in its very survival. It survives by turning its looks away from us, its face inclined toward a darkness we know nothing about.[31]

Here it appears that the "personal investment" that drives Foucault's approach to history is not an attachment to precursors but rather an "obsession with language . . . that escapes us in its very survival." The tightening of the throat that he feels in the dream seems to be a response to historical loss and to ignorance and to an expression of shame about pretending to read what he cannot. Despite the trauma of this loss, however, Foucault does not end by expressing a desire for the intact document. He does not, it seems, want to look history in the face; rather, the fascination here is with the face that turns away, and, even more, perhaps, with the darkness toward which it turns.

This moment recalls Foucault's discussion of "Eurydice and the Sirens" in his 1966 essay on Maurice Blanchot, "The Thought of the Outside." Foucault compares the heroic narrative of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens with the story of Orpheus's failed journey to bring back Eurydice from the underworld, suggesting that there is not much to distinguish the triumphant narrative from the tragic one:

> Each of their voices is then freed: Ulysses' with his salvation and the possibility of telling the tale of his marvelous adventure; Orpheus's with his absolute loss and never-ending lament. But it is possible that behind Ulysses' triumphant narrative there prevails the inaudible

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> lament of not having listened better and longer, of not having ventured as close as possible to the wondrous voice that might have finished the song. And that behind Orpheus's lament shines the glory of having seen, however fleetingly, the unattainable face at the very instant it turned away and returned to darkness—a nameless, placeless hymn to light.[32]

Although Foucault does not read these figures explicitly in relation to the work of the historian, they are legible in terms of a contrast between history as a tale of heroic rescue and "marvelous adventure" and history as a narrative that breaks off midway and that fails to bring the beloved back from the underworld. Clearly, Foucault throws in his lot in with Orpheus, who offers an apt emblem of the practice of queer history. The failed attempt to rescue Eurydice is a sign of the impossibility of the historical project per se: the dead do not come back from beyond the grave, and this fact constitutes the pathos of the historical project. But we might also read the Orphic lament as an effect of the particular losses suffered by queer historical subjects. We can trace the aftereffects of that history in the characteristically minor key in which Foucault's desire for the past is played.

To explain what I mean, I want to turn to Blanchot's staging of this moment in the "The Gaze of Orpheus," the essay that Foucault discusses. Describing the way that the work of art must be wrested from the "heart of night," Blanchot writes that

> by turning toward Eurydice, Orpheus ruins the work, which is immediately undone, and Eurydice returns among the shades. When he looks back, the essence of night is revealed as the inessential. Thus he betrays the work, and Eurydice, and the night. But not to turn toward Eurydice would be no less untrue. Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and in her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face—wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of death.[33]

Blanchot casts Orpheus's relation to Eurydice as an impossible relation: by turning back he betrays her, losing her forever in the lower depths; but the refusal to turn back would count as a betrayal as well.

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Such is the relation of the queer historian to the past: we cannot help wanting to save the figures from the past, but this mission is doomed to fail. In part, this is because the dead are gone for good; in part, because the queer past is even more remote, more deeply marked by power's claw; and in part because this rescue is an emotional rescue, and in that sense, we are sure to botch it. But, according to Blanchot, not to botch it would be a betrayal. Such a rescue effort can only take place under the shadow of loss and in the name of loss; success would constitute its failure.

Blanchot's reflections on Orpheus and Eurydice recall the moment when, in a 1983 interview, Foucault speculated that the "best moment" in the life of the homosexual is "likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi."[34] Foucault links this feeling to the availability of homosexual contacts; he suggests that because there is no contest to get someone into bed that the erotic is more bound up with retrospect than anticipation. But as he invokes this explanation, Foucault also gestures toward a history of queer feeling grounded in the social impossibility of homosexual love. Foucault's desire for the boy has a queer specificity; he would not easily give up the dreamy and rueful retrospect he inspires. He wants the love of "that boy," already receding into the distance—not the daytime love, the easy intimacies, of a domestic partner. He wants him in the taxi, just as Orpheus wants Eurydice in the night, in the underworld.

This structure of feeling is not a pathology, nor does it describe the essential nature of the homosexual. I would not call it, either, an effect of the "dark pulsions" of the unconscious, though I suppose they play their part in this scene. Anyone, I want to insist, might be seduced by the figure of Eurydice: she is radiant in her withdrawal. But her specific attraction for queer subjects is an effect, I want to argue, of a historical experience of love as bound up with loss. To recognize Eurydice as desirable in her turn away is a way of identifying through that loss. Such an approach would be consistent with an important aspect of contemporary queer politics, which has tended to define community not as constituted by a shared set of identity traits, but rather as emerging from a shared experience of social violence. In this sense, following the trace of violence and marginalization—studying not only obscure men, but obscurity itself—would allow us to deflect questions of identity and to acknowledge the losses of both the past and the present.

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I hear the trace of such losses in my own fantasized relation to Foucault. I do dream about being with Foucault, but I imagine joining him in the underworld, after the moment he has turned away. I want him in that darkness—bearing the marks of power's claw. How to explain such perverse, such intransigent desires? Queer history has been an education in absence: the experience of social refusal and of the denigration of homosexual love has taught us the lessons of solitude and heartbreak. What I want to suggest, though, is that it has also, in its way, taught us "how to do the history of homosexuality"—because, in the words of Neil Bartlett, "history can be a dark night too."[35]

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